

Safe Lifting

Despite the increased use of mechanical material handling equipment, many boxes, crates, bundles, and piles of materials still must be moved manually. This can lead to one of the most painful and costly work injuries employees can suffer—a back injury.

Whether material handling is your main job or just something that needs to be done occasionally, safety is very important. According to the National Safety Council, 400,000 workers suffer new back injuries each year. These injuries occur everywhere, not just in the stockrooms and warehouses.

Strains and sprains, fractures, and bruises are the most common injuries, and most of the time they are caused by unsafe work practices. No matter how knowledgeable or skilled we are, we all need to be reminded about ways to avoid injuries. Proper lifting is a learned skill that needs to be practiced to keep the proper lifting methods fresh in your mind.

Practice in lifting is as important as practice in first aid. You can practice even when you can't actually lift something. How? Before lifting, think your way through the procedure. Practice within your mind the proper steps in lifting the item.

Probably everyone has been told not to stoop over to lift. Your leg muscles, not your backbone, should do the work. Unfortunately, stooping over to lift is a habit we form during childhood. One way to break a habit is to form new ones. For example, if you stoop over to lift, retrain yourself to lift with your legs. Keep reminding yourself to do it this way until it becomes a new habit.

To lift a load to a point above your shoulders, plan ahead so you can rest the load about waist high, then change your grip and finish the lift. An even better idea is to get help.

Another common mistake is getting your fingers caught between the load and other surfaces. Lift the load a little so that one edge rests on the floor or table first, then let your hands slide up the sides so that when the full weight comes down, your fingers are not caught underneath. When walking through doorways or between machines, tuck your hands in or turn the load so that your fingers won't be trapped between the load and the other surface.

Finally, size up the job before you start the lift. If it is too big or awkward, don't be afraid to ask for help. After all, it is not just weight that makes a load a two-person job, it is also the size and shape.

To lift easily and safely, follow these six rules:

1. The feet—place one foot alongside the object to be lifted and the other behind it. This gives you stability and thrust.
2. The back—keep your back straight and use the sit-down position. Remember that means the back itself is straight, not necessarily vertical.

3. The chin—Tuck in your chin so the neck and head continue the straight back line formed by your neck.
4. The palms—extend your fingers and hands around the object you are going to lift.
5. Arms and elbows—draw the load close to your body with your arms and elbows tucked into the sides of your body.
6. Bodyweight—position yourself so the weight of your body is centered over your feet. This provides a more powerful line of thrust and good balance.